

Advanced Certified ScrumMaster® (A-CSM)



Listening Techniques
Pre-Reading Material

What IS Listening?

If you haven't read Sam Kaner's book, "The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making", this will be an introduction to the chapter on Facilitative Listening. The Listening Techniques described here, and used by many Agile Coaches world-wide, are used by facilitators to help others engage with the speaker's intent or idea. When a speaker tries to engage with an audience using a speaking style that is, in some way, not acceptable to the audience, these techniques can broaden the acceptance of the audience.

Paraphrasing- To reinforce that the speaker has been heard or understood, try to paraphrase their thoughts with questions like "It sounds like you are saying ...", "Let me see if I'm understanding you, ..." and "Is this what you mean? ..." You may also want to finish with something like "Did I get it?" Paraphrasing may help speakers think out loud.

Drawing People Out- This can be disruptive to the speaker's flow, but it directs their thoughts toward the listener's interests. This can be more helpful when the speaker's thoughts are fully formed, and less helpful during a brainstorming session. Useful phrases may include "Can you give me an example?", "How long will that take?", "I'm with you, tell me more about ...", "How so?", "Can you tell me more about that?"

Mirroring- Some key uses are for building trust on new teams and facilitating brainstorming sessions. Repeat back to the speaker exactly what they said, word-for-word. Your tone should be warm and accepting, even if the speaker's tone was not. This is about building trust, keep that in mind.

Gathering Ideas- This is a combination of Mirroring and Paraphrasing (with an emphasis on Mirroring) used to quickly list ideas from a group of people. Start by giving the group a task to generate ideas about, then repeat back each idea with words and gestures (hand and body movements), while recording each idea openly. The gestures combined with paraphrasing/mirroring keeps people well engaged.

Stacking- When several people want to speak at once, a facilitator can create a queue of speakers to make sure everyone respectfully gets a chance to speak. When a speaker is done, the facilitator will call on the next speaker in the queue. When the queue runs out, the facilitator can ask who else wants to speak, and create a new queue. You may replace the word 'queue' with 'stack' if you like.

Tracking- When several different topics begin to splinter a conversation, a facilitator may decide to list out all of the different topics or side conversations that have sprouted. Once they have listed them all, they should ask if they got it right. The facilitator can allow the conversation to resume after asking for more comments.

Encouraging- Used to create an opportunity for others to participate in the conversation. This may be more helpful at the beginning of a session. Encouraging is used to address the audience in general, not specifically calling on individuals.

Balancing- Similar to Encouraging, Balancing opens up the conversation to those who've either been silent or have said very little. Again, not addressing individuals, but getting more specific with the groups of people. Example: Calling on groups to share differences of opinion, play devil's advocate, or a fresh idea.

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Helping People Listen To Each Other- By asking the group specific questions about the current discussion, the facilitator prompts the group to expand upon, challenge or defend the idea(s) being expressed. We use this technique support people interacting with each other's ideas, as well as building team cohesion.

Making Space for a Quiet Person- Similar to Encouraging and Balancing, when we make space, we are inviting others to talk, or take their turn, but we are not demanding that they speak. Generally, we are letting the quieter people know that now is a good time to speak if there is something they want to say. "Did you want to add something?", "You look like you want to reply to that..."

Acknowledging Feelings- Watch for feelings being non-verbally expressed in a difficult conversation. Ask about that persons possible feelings. Use some of these Facilitative Listening Techniques to get them to express their feelings verbally. "You seem troubled. Would you like to explain?", "You sound a bit worried. Is that accurate?", "It looks like you are ... Am I close?"

Validating- Legitimizing an opinion or idea, without taking sides, or endorsing it. Paraphrase the idea, assess whether the speaker needs added support, offer that support if needed. "Hmm, that is definitely one way to look at this situation. Others may not see it the same way, but your perspective is totally legitimate."

Empathizing- Putting oneself in the shoes of another, and viewing their perspective as your own. Similar to Validating, Empathizing goes further toward providing the group with a more compassionate understanding of the speaker's perspective. Provide examples of how you might feel if this were your own view. "I imagine this news might be quite difficult for you to hear." Also, seek confirmation from the speaker.

Intentional Silence- Silence is a powerful tool to use when an idea or statement needs to be pondered/ consumed by the rest of the group, before a response. Ten seconds should be enough time for most people to ruminate. Don't respond at all, not even with body language. If the room is charged with emotion, you may need to call for silence "Let's take a few seconds to think about what this means to each of us."

Linking- When discussions seem to be getting off track, try these 4 steps to see if this new topic is related or a tangent. 1) Paraphrase the new topic; 2) Ask speaker to link the current idea with the original "Can you help us see how this is related to ...?" 3) Validate the linkage "I see what you mean now." 4) Take action using... *Drawing Out, Balancing/Encouraging, Stacking*, or moving it to a parking lot if it is off topic.

Listening for the Logic- This allows the entire group to hear a critique or idea fully before it is dismissed or delayed for a later discussion. Unique from *Paraphrasing* and *Drawing Out*, we are listening for the logic of the speaker's reasoning. When a speaker is offering logical reasoning and the group is responding constructively, hold back and let the discussion flow. If someone in the group is blocking constructive discussion, use *Paraphrasing* and *Drawing Out*.

Logical Analysis: Challenging an assertion; Identifying a bias; Questioning a requirement; Clarifying ambiguity; Making an assumption explicit; Pointing out a contradiction.

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Legitimizing Differences- When there are multiple differing points of view on a subject, use these steps to keep the discussion from becoming a back-and-forth between those few people arguing their strong view points. 1) Demonstrate your neutrality “You are both making good points. Please allow me to summarize them for legitimacy.” 2) Summarize and ask for confirmation. 3) Legitimize the views and ask others to comment “Both arguments sound compelling, though opposite. Would anyone else care to comment?”

Listening for Common Ground- This can be used when groups centralized around a value or goal lose sight of that fact when disagreeing on tactics. Make sure all views are included in these 4 steps. 1) Indicate that you will summarize the group’s similarities and differences. 2) Summarize the differences. 3) Summarize the similarities. 4) Check for accuracy. “Did I get this all correct?”

Listening with a Point of View- This helps the facilitator keep multiple roles in check. When the facilitator is also a leader who is participating, these 5 steps can help. 1) State your opinion about a matter. 2) Ask for reactions. 3) Using *Paraphrasing* and *Drawing Out*, respond to the group’s comments. 4) Respond to reactions, but only after several group members have spoken. 5) Repeat steps 2 through 4, but give your point of view only after at least twice as many others have responded.

Summarizing- This helps to segue from one important topic to another, as well as closing a series of discussions, without the group feeling rushed, or that the facilitator is in control. There are 5 steps to Summarizing. 1) Restate the question or underlying problem that started the discussion. 2) State the number of key themes from the discussion. 3) Name the first theme and some key points about that theme that were discussed. 4) Repeat step 3 for each theme. 5) Pose a question to bridge to the next topic “You have done some solid thinking about ... Anything else before you move on to the next topic on the agenda?”